

King family backs trial for Ray

With relatives of the slain civil rights leader and his confessed killer on the same side of the issue, pressure is mounting on a Memphis judge.

By Jerry Thomas
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

The family of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on Thursday supported a request by his confessed killer for a trial, turning up the pressure on a Memphis judge who will decide the issue.

Saying a trial would be the only way to answer lingering questions about his father's death, Dexter King said that he will ask Shelby County Criminal Court Judge Joseph Brown Jr. to grant James Earl Ray a chance to argue his innocence before a jury.

Ray, 68, who is dying of cirrhosis of the liver in a Nashville prison, never went to trial because he confessed to shooting King on April 4, 1968. But soon after he was sentenced to 99 years he proclaimed his innocence and said he was coerced into pleading guilty.

Judge Brown finds himself caught between white authorities—many of whom were around when King was killed here 29 years ago—who are ready to put the tragedy to rest, and a new generation of black leadership determined to get to the bottom of the slaying.

Black leaders, including the city's mayor and police chief, are praising Brown for agreeing to grant Ray a hearing Thursday into his claims that he was the victim of a conspiracy.

But some current and retired government and law enforcement officials in Memphis, most of them white, have been trying to block Ray from having a trial.

Many of them don't deny that others could have been involved in the assassination, but they are convinced that Ray was the triggerman and that he would reveal no new information in a hearing.

Rather, they accuse Brown of being a part of a publicity stunt that would be a waste of time and taxpayer money and bring more embarrassment to the city.

Brown, 49, who speaks his mind in public more than most judges and is



AP photo

Dexter King, son of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., discusses with reporters Thursday his family's desire to see James Earl Ray brought to trial.

not known to shy from controversy, said he is not afraid of the pressures surrounding his decision to hear the case.

He views the hearing as part of his responsibility as an African-American authority figure.

Brown frequently refers to himself as a "chieftain" of Memphis' "African village"—someone who wields the power of the criminal justice system to correct problems.

"Never in my wildest thoughts would I contemplate having this thing thrown in my lap," said Brown, a Los Angeles native who relocated to Memphis in 1974.

But, the University of California at Los Angeles Law School graduate added, he is not "stupid" enough to be a pawn for the Ray family.

"I don't give a damn if King Kong is standing right there," said Brown as he sat on the bench one recent morn-

ing in his black robe trimmed in red, black and green, the colors of African heritage.

"I will call it as I see it. I won't take a dive. I don't know what will happen, but I will try to make sure the right thing happens. I pride myself on standing up for the law."

Earlier this month, Ray and his family made a public plea for the Kings to support a move for a trial, attempting for the first time to communicate with King's survivors.

At a press conference in Atlanta Thursday morning, Dexter King and King's widow, Coretta, spoke in favor of Ray's request.

Dexter King, who directs the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolence and Social Change, said, "There are questions still surrounding this case and they need to be answered, and the only way to do that is through a court of law."

At the hearing next Thursday, Ray's attorneys and gun experts will attempt to prove through new scientific evidence that a rifle, recovered by authorities and traced to Ray, did not fire the bullet that killed King as he stood on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

Ray, who was arrested in London two months after the killing, does not deny being in Memphis on the day King was killed, nor does he deny owning the rifle. But he claims he did not kill King.

If Brown decides to hold the trial after examining the gun tests, Ray's attorney has said that Ray will release the names of some people who were involved in the case who are still alive.

The prosecution, however, does not believe that the tests by Ray's experts will prove any more successful than the ballistic tests conducted previ-

Friday, February 14, 1997 Section 1 3



Tribune photo by José Miró

Shelby County (Tenn.) Criminal Court Judge Joseph Brown Jr. (above) will hold a hearing Thursday on a request by James Earl Ray (right) for a trial.



Reuters photo.

ously by the FBI. Those tests were inconclusive.

Prosecutors also warn that Ray's previous tips—including one about a mysterious man named Raoul who lured him to Memphis—have led authorities to dead ends.

"They don't realize how many times this has been through the system," said John Campbell, the Shelby County assistant district attorney general, who will represent the state.

"This one is getting the most publicity, but he is raising issues from the past."

Campbell believes it is time for Memphis and the nation to move on.

"Nobody will ever be satisfied with the answer," he said. "Everybody has got their own theory."

Memphis, most people agree, has changed considerably since King's death.

Blacks make up more than half of the city's 610,000 residents and play a prominent role in the city's government. But many want to see Ray on the stand.

"I can truly say, I have to accept the fact it could have been a conspiracy," said Walter J. Winfrey, the city's police director, who joined the department several months after King's death. "I don't think we African-Americans should ever put it to rest."

Influential African-Americans gathered one recent night at the Memphis Sounds Lounge, a blues club, also supported the move for a trial.

"I think this case is far more complicated than we can imagine," said Mayor W. W. Herenton, the city's first black mayor, as he sat at a table with some of the city's new powerbrokers.

"I, like many Americans, am looking for the real truth, and we don't feel as if we know the truth."